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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest asserts that the Japanese education system is one of the most influential agents molding Japanese youth. This influence is especially great due to the large amount of time students spend in schools. Six topics examine aspects of daily high school life: (1) Getting to School; (2) At School; (3) Extracurricular Activities; (4) "Cram Schools"; (5) Entrance Examinations; and (6) Free Time. "Getting to School" emphasizes the way school policies regulate student behavior on the way to and from school, illustrating the schools' limitless responsibility for students, regardless of their location. "At School" explains the importance and organization of the homeroom, lunch activities, school attendance, course selection, and school cleaning and how these activities are conducted to foster responsibility and collectivism. "Extracurricular Activities" examines the types of clubs students participate in and the way that relationships formed in these clubs lay the foundations for future relationships in society. "Cram Schools" characterizes the different types of after school "cram schools" where approximately 60% of Japanese high school students go for supplemental lessons, and describes their role in an overall educational system designed to prepare students for school entrance examinations. "Entrance Examinations" lists the subjects tested and describes the supreme role these examinations play in determining future careers and opportunities. "Free Time" illustrates the way Japanese students spend their time outside of school, including the amount of time devoted to homework, relaxing, and socializing. (Contains seven references.) (MLJ)

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Daily Life in Japanese High Schools

by Marcia L. Johnson and Jeffrey R. Johnson

Understanding the Japanese people and culture requires understanding the factors that mold them. Particularly important are those components which influence them in their formative years. The Japanese education system is one of the most influential agents molding Japanese youth. Given the large amount of time that Japanese students spend in schools, it is little wonder that the education system plays a tremendous role in determining the fabric of Japanese society. An examination of the "typical" high school experience illuminates the function of the education system in Japanese society.

Getting to School. Japanese high school students do not drive cars. Many either walk or ride bicycles if the distance is not too great. In other cases, students must take public buses and trains, often changing lines several times in order to reach their destinations. It is not uncommon for students to spend two or more hours each day on public transportation. After junior high school, students attend schools based on standardized high school entrance examination scores. As a result, some students travel a great distance to attend the school determined by their test scores. The school day begins at 8:30, so students may leave home as early as 6:30. While some students sleep or study during their long commute, public transportation also provides a chance for socializing with peers. Student behavior on the way to school is regulated by school policies. These policies may prohibit certain activities in public--chewing gum, consuming snacks, reading books while walking--anything that might reflect badly on the reputation of the school. Each school has a unique uniform that makes its students easily identifiable to the public. School policies often require students to stand on buses and trains, leaving seats open for other passengers in order to demonstrate consideration. In practice, however, the behavior of students tends to relax as they move farther away from school.

At School. Once at school, the students usually enter an area full of small lockers in which they place their street shoes and don school slippers. These slippers may be color coded: pink for girls and blue for boys. Many schools have a weekly school-wide assembly. Then students assemble in their homeroom classes for the day's studies. The school day starts with classroom management tasks, such as taking attendance and making announcements. These activities usually are conducted by the students themselves on a rotating duty schedule called *tōban*. Each homeroom has an average of 40-45 students. Students stay in their homeroom classrooms for most of the school day while the teachers move from room to room, operating out of a central teachers' room. Only for physical education, laboratory classes, or other subjects requiring special facilities do students move to different parts of the school. Between classes and at lunch time, classrooms can be noisy, lively places. Some schools may have a cafeteria, but most do not. Even in schools where a lunch is prepared and provided to the students, they usually eat together in their homeroom classrooms. In most schools, students bring a box lunch from home, almost always consisting of foods prepared by the mother in the early morning hours, such as rice, fish, eggs, vegetables, and pickles.

Japanese students spend 240 days a year at school, 60 days more than their American counterparts. Although many of those days are spent preparing for annual school festivals and events such as Culture Day, Sports Day, and school excursions, Japanese students still spend considerably more time in class than American students. Traditionally, Japanese students have attended school for half a day on Saturdays; however, the number of required Saturdays each month is decreasing as the result of Japanese educational reforms. Course selection and textbooks are determined by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Schools have limited autonomy in their curriculum development. Students in academic high schools typically take three years each of the following subjects: mathematics, social studies, Japanese, science, and English. Other subjects include physical education, music, art, and moral studies. All the students in one grade level study the same subjects. Given the number of required subjects, electives are few.

At the end of the academic day, all students participate in *ō sōji*, the cleaning of the school. They sweep the classrooms and the hallways, empty trash cans, clean restrooms, clean chalkboards and chalk erasers, and pick up trash from the school grounds. After *ō sōji*, school is dismissed and most students disperse to different parts of the school for club meetings.

Extracurricular Activities. Club activities take place after school every day. Teachers are assigned as sponsors, but often the students themselves determine the club's daily activities. Students can join only one club, and they rarely change clubs from year to year. In most schools, clubs can be divided into two types: sports clubs (baseball, soccer, *jūdō*, *kendō*, track, tennis, swimming, softball, volleyball, rugby) and culture clubs (English, broadcasting, calligraphy, science, mathematics, yearbook). New students usually are encouraged to select a club shortly after the school year begins in April. Clubs meet for two hours after school each day and many clubs continue to meet during school vacations. Club activities provide one of the primary opportunities for peer group socialization. Most college bound students withdraw from club activities during their senior year to devote more time to preparation for university entrance examinations. Although visible in the general high school experience, it is in the clubs that the fundamental relationships of

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senpai (senior) and *kōhai* (junior) are established most solidly. It is the responsibility of the *senpai* to teach, initiate, and take care of the *kōhai*. It is the duty of the *kōhai* to serve and defer to the *senpai*. For example, *kōhai* students in the tennis club might spend one year chasing tennis balls while the upperclassmen practice. Only after the upperclassmen have finished may the underclassmen use the courts. The *kōhai* are expected to serve their *senpai* and to learn from them by observing and modeling their behavior. This fundamental relationship can be seen throughout Japanese society, in business, politics, and social dealings.

"Cram Schools." An interesting component of Japanese education is the thriving industry of *juku* and *yobikō*, after school "cram schools," where approximately 60% of Japanese high school students go for supplemental lessons. *Juku* may offer lessons in nonacademic subjects such as art, swimming, abacus, and calligraphy, especially for elementary school students, as well as the academic subjects that are important to preparation for entrance examinations at all levels. *Juku* for high school students must compete for enrollment with *yobikō*, which exist solely to prepare students for university entrance examinations. Some "cram schools" specialize in preparing students for the examination of a particular school. Although it would seem natural for students to dread the rigor of additional lessons that extend their school day well into the late evening hours and require additional homework, many students enjoy *juku* and *yobikō*, where the teachers often are more animated and more interesting than some of the teachers in their regular schools. Also, in many cases, the lessons studied in "cram schools" provide an intellectual challenge for students bored with the standardized curriculum of their regular schools.

Juku and *yobikō* are primarily private, for profit schools that attract students from a wide geographical area. They often are located near train stations, enabling students to transport themselves easily to *juku* directly from school. *Juku* and *yobikō* thrive in Japan, where it is believed that all people possess the same innate intellectual capacity, and it is only the effort of individuals, or lack thereof, that determines their achievement above or below their fellows. In Japanese schools, there is the tendency to pass students with their grade cohort. Therefore, without the supplemental *juku* lessons, some students could fall well behind their classmates. *Yobikō* also exist to serve *rōnin*, "masterless samurai," students who have failed an entrance examination, but who want to try again. It is possible for students to spend a year or two as *rōnin* after graduating from high school, studying at *yobikō* until they can pass a university entrance examination or until they give up. "Cram school" tuition is expensive, but most parents are eager to pay in order to ensure acceptance into a selective junior high school, high school, or university, and thus, a good future for their children.

Entrance Examinations. In addition to university admission, entrance to high school also is determined by examination, and the subjects tested are Japanese, mathematics, science, social studies, and English. Private high schools create their own examinations, while those for public high schools are standardized within each prefecture. Students (and their parents) consider each school's college placement record when deciding which examinations to take. Success or failure on an entrance examination can influence a student's entire future, since the prospect of finding a good job depends on the school attended. Thus, students experience the pressure of this examination system at a relatively early age. But, practice tests at school and *juku* help teachers to direct students toward institutions whose examinations they are most likely to pass.

Free Time. Japanese students devote approximately two hours per weekday on homework, and about three hours on Sunday. They spend an average of two hours per day watching television, half an hour listening to the radio, an hour reading casually, and less than half an hour in social relations with peers outside of school. Japanese adults tend to perceive high school students in many ways as large children instead of young adults. And, while opposite sexes are interested in each other, parents and teachers strongly discourage teenage dating. Most young people do not begin to date until after high school. Finally, for a variety of reasons, there are few drug problems among Japanese adolescents.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the information provided or requested through Interlibrary Loan.

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